

# Communicative Informatics: A Social Media Perspective for Online Communities

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## Abstract

Individuals are active audience members that use Internet-based social media technologies to create and negotiate social action in online spaces. Communicative informatics is the key to constructing, describing or critiquing social media. Communicative informatics is the discovery of the audience, text/image, technology, negotiated place relationships that create symbolic meaning. Four propositions focus on the communication of the audience: 1) the audience is active; 2) the audience is creative; 3) the audience interacts with technology and 4) place is negotiated in online communication.

## Communicative Informatics

The Internet is the “ultimate connecting tool” (Coget, Yamauchi, & Suman, 2002) and communication has been identified as the primary purpose of the Internet (Lo, Fang, & Wang, 2005). In the transformation of message, place, and time for social interaction, online communication changes the notion of a passive media audience. *Individuals are active audience members that use Internet-based social media technologies to create and negotiate social action in online spaces.* Online communication has reconfigured how businesses, the media, politicians, and everyday people interact with audiences. The audience, as constructed on the Internet, is more active and creative than ever before in history. The term, audience, is humanizing and provides a sense of agency to the user. Audience also emphasizes the communication function of the Internet, that when acted upon by people with communicative intent, the situation is more than mere data transfer. However, communicative action in online social settings must be meaning based for individuals (users/senders/producers) and audiences (receivers) to build social links establishing common understandings that can form and sustain online communities. Communicative informatics is the key to constructing, describing or critiquing social media. Communicative informatics is the discovery of the audience, text/image, technology, negotiated place relationships that create symbolic meaning. We investigate online communities from this communication perspective to reveal what ingredients of

communication and sociability an online system needs to facilitate online communities. Central to any formation of community, online or offline, is communication. Communication facilitates all the other components of community formation, which includes people and their common desires and motivating factors such as goals, interests, and fears (Parrish, 2002).

## Four Propositions about the Internet Audience

Four propositions about the Internet audience speak to the two major concerns surrounding online communities: definition (de Souza & Preece, 2004; and Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2002) and critical success factors (de Souza & Preece, 2004; and Jones & Rafaeli, 2000). These four propositions can be used to help design and construct better online environments. The propositions can be used in usability studies, descriptive analysis or cultural critiques of websites, online communities or a cluster of Internet sites.

### Proposition 1: The Audience is Active.

The audience has agency. The audience makes choices. The audience is relatively active when using the Internet. They search, interact, click, and use the Internet for a wide variety of purposes. They are making choices when scanning, clicking links, posting, buying, or voting. Clearly some members of any Internet audience are more active than others. Some are leaders, more engaged or more involved. Pew Internet & American Life has constructed scales of audience engagement based on typology of Internet use (Horrihan, 2007). Marketing firms like Acxiom have segmented the American audience and many European audiences into segments based on different Internet usages and behaviors.

The audience’s activities such as emailing, searching, and buying can be examined from a uses and gratifications perspective. Stafford and Stafford (2000) found five

motivations for Internet use: search, cognitive, social, new and unique, and entertainment.

### **Proposition 2: The Audience is Creative.**

With the advent of Web 2.0, even general audiences without web development skills have been able to develop personalized web pages by using templates to create individualized and personalized websites on social networking sites. The audience members create by constructing home pages, blogs, posts, tags, photos displays, and ads. Audience members can also vote on content. Singer (2007) reported that Web 2.0 which features interactivity and user-generated content (UGC) has had dramatic growth in the past two years with a 68% growth in top US participatory Internet sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, and Flickr.

Interactivity and UGC has allowed for user creativity on sites like, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and many blogging sites. Internet sites are inherently rhetorical. Through online communication average people are using the communication delivery tools provided by advertisers, content developers, large corporations, religious organizations, non-profits, and government organizations. People are seeking to persuade, inform or manipulate symbolic content about their own identity, their social afflictions, and their online and offline communities. The audience can create its own identity, manipulate their identity and transform social communities by their creative use of blogs, hyperlinks, tags, posts, podcasts, games and videos.

### **Proposition 3: The Audience Interacts with Technology.**

The audience shapes the technology that they use in an ongoing process of reacting, resisting, and regulating the communication process. The audience creates unintended consequences when they interact with Internet technology in unexpected ways. People continue to invent ways to make Internet-based media more social or natural. From manipulating textual key strokes to make symbolic happy faces or frowns to producing online videos and podcasts. In online environments, people construct more naturalistic forms of communication by manipulating flow, time coordination, and social cues, and phatic communication to shape mediated social interaction into more naturalistic meaningful communication forms.

### **Proposition 4: Place is Negotiated in Online Communication.**

An audience member may be home in real life (physical world) but acting in a work or social environment online. The person's cognitive and social attention is aimed at the online place. A person's attentive "place" is fluid based on the process of communication. Many social and work

communities are online and going mobile. This provides users even more online places and ways to connect with others. The places and times where people interact with each other through the Internet is more in control of the individual. People are no longer tied to a hardwired connection in the home, workplace, or library. In conclusion, the Internet and its audience transform communication. Meaning online is actively created as people engage others in social communities, react to the technology, and negotiate new notions of time and place.

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